United Nations A/53/170

General Assembly

Distr.: General
10 July 1998

Original: English

Fifty-third session
Item 58 of the provisional agenda*
Strengthening of the United Nations system

Arrangements and practices for the interaction of non-governmental organizations in all activities of the United Nations system

Report of the Secretary-General

Contents

		Paragraphs	Page
I.	Introduction	1–4	2
II.	Institutional arrangements	5–31	2
III.	A growing operational partnership	32–47	8
IV.	Building bridges between civil society and the United Nations	48–59	11
V.	Participation of non-governmental organizations from all regions	60–70	13
VI.	Enhancing the participation of non-governmental organizations in all areas of the United Nations system	71-80	15

* A/53/150

98-20259 (E) 100898

I. Introduction

1. Following the adoption by the Economic and Social Council of its decision 1996/297, by which the Council recommended that the General Assembly examine the question of participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in all areas of the United Nations, the General Assembly, by its decision 52/453 of 19 December 1997, requested the Secretary-General to prepare and circulate for consideration at its fifty-third session a report on:

(a) Existing arrangements and practices for the interaction of non-governmental organizations in all activities of the United Nations system;

(b) The legal and financial implications of modifications in the current arrangements for participation of non-governmental organizations with a view to enhancing their participation in all areas of the United Nations system;

(c) The question of the participation of non-governmental organizations from all regions, in particular from the developing countries.

The present report is submitted pursuant to the request contained in that decision. It is based on the information conveyed to the Secretary-General by departments, agencies, funds and programmes for this specific purpose.

2. The General Assembly's increased interest in the issue of NGOs and their relation to the United Nations reflects the striking changes which have marked these relations in the last two decades. From the 41 NGOs granted consultative status by the Economic and Social Council in 1948, and 377 in 1968, the number of NGOs in consultative status has now expanded to over 1,350. There were 200 NGOs associated with the Department of Public Information in 1968; there are now 1,550. Approximately 1,800 representatives of 637 organizations from 61 countries attended last year's Department of Public Information/NGO Conference. In terms of net transfers, non-governmental organizations collectively constitute the second largest source of development assistance. In December 1997, the Nobel Academy recognized the role of NGOs in the Ottawa process which led to the adoption of the Convention banning anti-personnel landmines. These facts vividly illustrate the universal movement towards greater citizen action, sometimes described as the "global associational revolution", which has characterized the past few years. Other examples abound of the dramatic rise in people's capacity to organize themselves and in the influence exerted by social movements in virtually all areas of concern and at all levels of governance.

3. The activity of non-State actors has become an essential dimension of public life in all parts of the world. Reform and restructuring of the United Nations thus coincide with the emergence of a new participatory international system responding to the forces of globalization sweeping our world. The growing influence and role of non-State actors has been both a hallmark and a cause of our changing international environment. NGOs are the clearest manifestation of what is referred to as "civil society", that is, the sphere in which social movements organize themselves around objectives, constituencies and thematic interests. Other actors, however, have also taken on an increasingly important role in shaping national and international agendas and policy dialogues. They include local authorities, mass media, business and industry leaders and the research community, including academia and think-tanks. With lesser bureaucratic and institutional restraints, all have embraced and benefited from the profound impact brought about by the information and communication revolution. NGOs have been particularly effective in utilizing the instant access to information made possible by new technologies, and have themselves become primary sources and disseminators of information.

4. To varying degrees and with varying rates of success, the United Nations has attempted to adapt to this phenomenon and to open its doors to civil society. This has been most visible in the series of world summits and conferences held in the first half of the 1990s. In their aftermath, measures to strengthen cooperation with NGOs are being taken across the entire United Nations system and in virtually all areas of its activity. The present report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the present institutional arrangements which frame the relations between the United Nations and NGOs, while also depicting the multiple forms which these relations have taken in practice. It also attempts to answer a number of important questions which have arisen in this regard, such as the need for the United Nations to ensure a balanced geographical representation among its partners in civil society, or ways in which it can respond to the growing demands of NGOs for of access to information and increased participation.

II. Institutional arrangements

5. The relationship between the United Nations and NGOs is not a new phenomenon. The United Nations as a whole derives its mandate to work with civil society from the Charter itself and its opening words "We, the peoples...". Article 71 provides that the Economic and Social Council

may make "suitable arrangements for consultation" with NGOs. For nearly three decades, arrangements for consultation of the Economic and Social Council with NGOs were governed by resolution 1296 (XLIV) of 23 May 1968. In 1996, after a thorough review, the Council adopted resolution 1996/31 which established three categories of status for NGOs. General consultative status is for large, international NGOs whose area of work covers most of the issues on the Council' s agenda. Special consultative status is for NGOs that have special competence in a few fields of the Council's activity. The third category, which is inclusion on the Roster, is for NGOs whose competence enables them to make occasional and useful contributions to the work of the United Nations and who are available for consultation upon request. NGOs on the Roster may also include organizations in consultative status with a specialized agency or other United Nations body.

6. Those NGOs which are granted consultative status acquire certain rights and responsibilities. The provisional agenda of the Council is communicated to all of them and NGOs with general status have the right to place items on this agenda and that of the Council's subsidiary bodies. Organizations with general and special status may designate authorized representatives to sit as observers at public meetings of the Economic and Social Council and subsidiary bodies. NGOs on the Roster may have representatives at such meetings concerned with matters within their field of competence. Organizations in general and special status may submit brief written statements which can be published as United Nations documents and circulated to members of the Council or subsidiary bodies. Organizations on the Roster may also be invited to submit written statements. Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 makes provision for oral presentations by organizations in general or special consultative status during certain meetings of the Council. NGOs in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council must report every four years on their activities.

7. The Secretary-General is authorized to offer facilities to NGOs in consultative status, including:

- Prompt and efficient distribution of documents of the Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary bodies as appropriate;
- Access to United Nations press documentation services;
- Arrangement of informal discussions on matters of special interest to groups or organizations;
- Appropriate seating arrangements and facilities for obtaining documents during public meetings of the General Assembly that deal with matters in the economic, social and related fields.

8. NGOs have been particularly involved in the work of some of the Council's subsidiary bodies, including the Commission on Human Rights, the Commission on Sustainable Development and the Commission on the Status of Women. For instance, NGOs in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council participate in the Commission on Human Rights and the Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, to which they may make oral or written statements. In accordance with procedures established by the Council and the Commission, NGOs, whether in consultative status or not, may submit information regarding allegations of human rights violations. The Working Group on Indigenous Populations of the Subcommission, attended by nearly 1,000 NGOs annually, has instituted the practice of accepting statements from NGOs, mainly indigenous ones, few of which have consultative status. As required by Agenda 21, adopted in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the Commission on Sustainable Development has included representatives of "major groups",[1] including NGOs, in its deliberations. The Commission has also adopted new modalities, such as including NGO representatives on United Nations panel discussions.

9. Consultative status with the Economic and Social Council remains at the core of the formal relationship between the United Nations and NGOs. While no such arrangement has been established by the General Assembly, practice has already evolved to allow a certain degree of informal participation by NGOs in the work of the Assembly's Main Committees and several of its subsidiary bodies. NGOs participate in the work of the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee) in their capacity as petitioners. In all instances, NGOs have requested permission to petition the Committee and it is in that capacity that they have addressed the Committee or participated in its work. In a similar manner, NGOs participate in the work of the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.

10. NGOs have also participated very actively in special sessions of the General Assembly. NGO representatives addressed the General Assembly at the plenary meetings of its nineteenth special session, held in June 1997, to review the implementation of Agenda 21. Some 1,000 organizations were accredited on that occasion. At the twentieth special session of the General Assembly, held in June 1998,

accreditation was granted to all NGOs with a serious interest in the questions of drug abuse and illicit trafficking, including many which neither held consultative status with the Economic and Social Council nor were associated with the Department of Public Information, but which had enjoyed a working relationship with the United Nations International Drug Control Programme or were listed in the Programme's directory of NGOs. NGOs were invited to make an input into the draft guiding principles of drug demand reduction adopted by the General Assembly at the special session.

11. The United Nations Secretariat's relationship with NGOs is manifold. The functions of facilitating the consultative process with and disseminating information to the non-governmental community are the responsibility of two offices of the Secretariat, namely, the NGO Section of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the NGO Section of the Department of Public Information. The main function of the former is to serve as the substantive secretariat of the Economic and Social Council Committee on NGOs, composed of 24 Member States, which reviews NGO applications for consultative status and makes recommendations thereon to the Council. This servicing involves the screening and processing by the Section of all applications submitted to the NGO Committee, a task that is becoming increasingly demanding as the yearly number of applications continues to rise. The Section also receives and processes the quadrennial reports submitted by the NGOs for the Committee's review. It provides accreditation to representatives of NGOs in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council and maintains close contact with the Conference of non-governmental organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations. At the United Nations Office at Geneva, an NGO Liaison Office carries out accreditation procedures and provides other types of logistical or substantive assistance to NGOs in consultative status.

12. The relationship between NGOs and the Department of Public Information is based on General Assembly resolution 13 (I) of 13 February 1946, by which the Assembly decided that the Department and its branch offices should actively assist and encourage national information services, educational institutions and other governmental and interested groups in spreading information about the United Nations. Formal association with the Department was given legislative authority by the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 1297 (XLIV). In cooperation with United Nations information centres and other United Nations offices worldwide, the Department's NGO Section evaluates applications from NGOs wishing to enter into formal association with the Department. A Department of Public Information Committee examines the applications and takes decisions on whether or not to include NGOs in the annual Department of Public Information/NGO Directory. The NGO/Department of Public Information Executive Committee, composed of 18 members elected by NGOs in association with the Department of Public Information, serves as the liaison between NGOs and the Department. Services offered by the Department to NGOs are described in section IV of the present report.

13. Over the years, most substantive departments have appointed one or several NGO liaison officers to facilitate access by NGOs to the United Nations and improve communications between officials in these departments and NGO experts in the relevant fields. These relations vary greatly from department to department and according to the issue at hand. The relations established between the Department for Disarmament Affairs and NGOs are briefly described here as an example. The Department for Disarmament Affairs works mainly with those peace and disarmament-related NGO members of the NGO Committee on Disarmament (a subsidiary body of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations based in New York and comprising 56 organizations) and the Special NGO Committee on Disarmament (another Committee of the Conference based in Geneva, and comprising 42 organizations). Collaboration with NGOs focuses on two main areas, namely, (a) implementation of the United Nations Disarmament Information programme in New York, Geneva and in various regions of the world and (b) coordination of NGO participation in disarmament-related meetings and conferences. Reference is made to the United Nations Disarmament Information campaign in section IV below. As for NGO participation in meetings, the Department coordinates the participation of NGOs in intergovernmental conferences and meetings (under United Nations auspices or related to the review of international treaties) to the fullest extent permitted by the relevant rules of procedure. In the case of treaty review conferences, when serving as secretariat, the Department makes recommendations to the States parties on the accreditation of NGOs, also in accordance with the rules of procedures established for such bodies. Arrangements for NGOs include allowing access to premises and meeting rooms, the receipt and presentation of documentation, the provision of office space and supplies and the setting up of briefings by officers and other delegations participating in the meeting.

14. In his report entitled "Renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform" (A/51/950), presented to the

Assembly in 1997, the Secretary-General called for all departments that had not yet done so to designate a NGO liaison officer. In an effort to coordinate better the activities of all these focal points, and to ensure consistency in the Secretariat's dealings with NGOs, an Inter-Departmental Working Group on NGOs was revived three years ago and is currently chaired by the Assistant Secretary-General for External Relations. A similar group meets at the United Nations Office at Geneva and is chaired by a representative of the Director-General. The main objective of the working groups is to develop common guidelines and exchange information, without curtailing the necessary flexibility that should govern each department's dealings with specific NGOs. They are a useful device for fostering contacts among officials working with NGOs and channelling information to the Office of the Secretary-General.

15. The majority of funds, agencies and programmes of the United Nations system have also received a clear mandate from their governing bodies to work with NGOs, and have developed a wide range of mechanisms to do so. Many of their own procedures and arrangements in this field reflect those of the Economic and Social Council consultative status. Most involve the granting of a formal status for consultation and many include annual consultation between United Nations officials and their main partners in the non-governmental community. While formal responsibility for cooperation with NGOs often resides in external relations services, or their equivalent, staff in the other units of the secretariats maintain informal contacts with NGOs, maintaining liaison and collaborating on technical and operational matters.

16. Arrangements for the participation of NGOs in the intergovernmental activities of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), for instance, are governed by the rules of procedure and the decisions of the Trade and Development Board. Those organizations which exercise functions and have a basic interest in most of the activities of the Board are placed in the general category, while those with special competence in specific activities fall into the special category. National NGOs of recognized standing deemed to have a significant contribution to make to the work of UNCTAD are placed on the Register after consultation with the Member State concerned. There are currently 177 NGOs in status with UNCTAD, 95 in the general category and 82 in the special category. NGOs in status receive notifications of and documents for conferences and meetings convened by UNCTAD. Their representatives are entitled to participate as observers, without the right to vote, in the public meetings of the intergovernmental bodies.

17. As early as 1950, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was specifically called upon by the General Assembly to "obtain from ... non-governmental organizations having a special interest in child and family welfare the advice and technical assistance which it may require for the implementation of its programmes" (resolution 417 (V) of 1 December 1950). Accordingly, UNICEF has granted consultative status to those international development organizations which already hold consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, engage in child-related activities and wish to formalize their relationship with UNICEF. This allows them to be represented as observers at meetings of the Executive Board, and, with the agreement of the Board's Chairperson, to take the floor and circulate statements if they express a particular interest in the agenda items under discussion. Currently, 191 NGOs hold consultative status with UNICEF.

18. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) does not have formal accreditation procedures for NGOs, but draws up memoranda of understanding and cooperation agreements for specific areas of cooperation with individual NGOs, as needed. UNDP's relationship with what it refers to as civil society organizations are now guided by a policy statement issued in June 1997. In June 1997, the UNDP/United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Executive Board also adopted rules of procedure allowing it to invite, when it considers appropriate, intergovernmental organizations and NGOs in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council to participate in its deliberations for questions that relate to their activities. At Headquarters, the UNDP Civil Society and Participation Programme is responsible for strengthening UNDP policy and operational methods to collaborate effectively with civil society organizations. The UNDP Division of Public Affairs works to advance UNDP relations with civil society organizations in advocacy and public information. In response to proposals from its civil society organization/NGO partners, UNDP is currently working to create a civil society organization/NGO Committee which could facilitate relations between UNDP and NGOs on operational, policy and advocacy matters.

19. Since its inception, UNFPA has maintained close operational relationships with NGOs. In 1995, UNFPA established an NGO Advisory Committee at the international level to advise it on policy and programming matters and to promote a more active involvement of NGOs in its work, especially in its advocacy activities. The Advisory Committee, which meets annually, is composed of from 25 to 30 representatives of community-based, national, regional and international NGOs. A Working Group on NGO

accreditation reviews applications by NGOs seeking a collaborative relationship with UNFPA. NGOs which meet certain criteria are recommended by the Working Group to the Policy and Planning Committee for approval. UNFPA has also recently established the NGO/Civil Society Theme Group to formulate, recommend and implement strategies, procedures and activities that will promote, strengthen and facilitate UNFPA interaction and collaboration with civil society. Both UNFPA staff at Headquarters and in the field participate in the work of the Theme Group.

20. The World Food Programme (WFP) also invites NGOs to attend its Executive Board meetings as observers and, as such, they are allowed to take the floor, upon request. In addition, WFP conducts a regular policy dialogue with its major operational partners through an annual "WFP-NGO Consultation" which is jointly managed and organized by the NGOs and WFP. The agenda and membership of the Consultation are proposed by the NGOs themselves. Likewise, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) allows NGOs to participate as observers in both its Executive and Standing Committees. A UNHCR/NGO Consultation precedes the Executive Committee meeting.

21. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) does not give formal or consultative status to NGOs. However, subject to formal approval by the Executive Board, NGOs may participate as observers in meetings of the IFAD Governing Council. The annual consultation which IFAD has also been holding with selected NGO partners since 1990 provides a forum for dialogue between the Fund and representatives of the NGO community on past, ongoing and future cooperation. The consultation always reviews a range of issues arising from IFAD/NGO cooperation as well as some specific themes. An Advisory Group of NGOs was formed to choose these themes, select the participants, and provide ongoing advice on ways to strengthen IFAD/NGO collaboration.

22. Many specialized agencies of the United Nations system grant consultative status to NGOs whose goals and activities are directly related to these agencies' mandate, and from which they can obtain information or expert advice. For instance, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) grants consultative status to NGOs whose activities are directly related to its purposes. These NGOs (54 at present) are invited to be represented by observers at sessions of the governing bodies of IMO and its committees and their subsidiary bodies. The IMO Rules require reciprocal privileges to be accorded to IMO by the NGOs to which consultative status has been granted. Those organizations have also undertaken to support the activities of IMO and to promote the dissemination of its principles and work.

23. The Basic Texts of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) also provide for formal arrangements for consultation, cooperation and liaison with NGOs. Three kinds of formal relations are granted, namely, consultative status, special consultative status and liaison status. At present, 190 international NGOs have formal relations with FAO. They can be invited to send observers to the sessions of the FAO Council and Conference and to participate in experts' meetings and technical conferences and seminars. A Unit for Cooperation with the Private Sector and NGOs has been established to review and strengthen cooperation with civil society.

24. Initial provisions for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) relations with NGOs were set out in UNESCO's constitution. These provisions were completed in 1960 by a set of Directives adopted by the General Conference. Guided by these Directives, UNESCO established formal relations, at three different levels or categories with some 580 international NGOs. The new Directives adopted in 1995 did away with the "hierarchy" inherent in the previous ones and placed greater emphasis on operationality, direct action in the field and closer contact with grass-roots organizations. However, the new Directives still draw a distinction between national and international or regional NGOs. While they provide for the continuation of close relations with a small group of international NGOs, they also introduce a new, more flexible, set of arrangements. Thus, UNESCO can cooperate with NGOs at all levels (international, regional, subregional, national, local and grass-roots) under what are termed "operational relations", with the purpose of helping the organization amplify its concrete action in the field. Provisions are also made for regular meetings with representatives of NGOs having a formal relation with UNESCO, both at the global level and through regional consultations.

25. Article 71 of the constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO) stipulates that WHO may "on matters within its competence make suitable arrangements for consultation and cooperation with non-governmental international organizations and, with the consent of the Government concerned, with national organizations, governmental or non-governmental". Unlike the Economic and Social Council, WHO has only one category of formal relations, and in principle, only international NGOs are eligible. The Executive Board decides whether an NGO is to be admitted into what it refers to as "official relations with WHO". Each NGO in official relations is appointed a

designated technical officer who is responsible for the development and maintenance of joint collaboration. NGOs in official relations have the right to participate, but not to vote, in WHO's meetings or in those of the committees and conferences convened under its authority. All other contacts with NGOs, including working relations, are considered to be of an informal character. With the exception of administrative programmes, most WHO programmes have some type of formal or informal interaction with NGOs. In fact, official relations normally result when contacts and joint activities develop over the years into mutually agreed programmes of work in international health or health-related activities. There are more than 180 NGOs enjoying official relations with WHO. WHO regional offices can establish working relations with national and regional organizations.

26. Article 19 of the Constitution of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) provides that the Director-General can establish appropriate relations with non-governmental and other organizations the work of which is related to that of the Organization. When establishing relations with national NGOs, the Director-General must consult with the Governments concerned. At present, more than 100 NGOs enjoy consultative status with UNIDO, which is granted by the Industrial Development Board and which enables them to participate in the meetings of the Industrial Development Board, the General Conference and in other activities. Within the office of the Director-General, it is the task of the External Relations Service to coordinate UNIDO activities with NGOs.

27. Since the early 1980s, the World Bank's dialogue with NGOs has been guided primarily through the NGO-World Bank Committee, which was formed in 1982 to provide an avenue of exchange between NGOs and Bank management. The Committee's meetings provide a formal, international arena for policy discussions among senior bank managers and 26 NGO leaders from around the world. The NGOs determine the membership through a staggered election process, which allows for annual rotation and diversity of NGO representation. The Committee is currently in the process of being decentralized to the regions, where it is envisioned that its work will have greater focus on regional and country-specific issues. In the Bank, the NGO Unit, housed in the Social Development Department, works with Resident Missions and headquarters offices on issues related to NGOs and broader civil society participation in the Bank's activities. There are now staff in 63 Resident Missions with full or partial responsibility for NGO matters. An NGO thematic group brings together representatives from each region and the central vice presidency to facilitate discussion of matters related to both operational and policy work with NGOs.

28. Owing to the nature of their activities, a number of United Nations agencies have established very specific relations with non-governmental entities. Among them, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has a long-standing tradition of private sector participation, which has intensified in recent years. Its partners in civil society, which include recognized operating agencies, scientific or industrial organizations and financial or development institutions, are referred to as "sector members". Sector members have the right to participate in and submit written contributions to ITU Conferences (other than those empowered to conclude legal instruments having treaty status), assemblies and meetings.

29. The International Labour Organization (ILO) is the only tripartite institution within the United Nations family. Its constituents are Governments, employers' and workers' organizations, the latter two being represented in national delegations on equal footing with Governments. Representatives of employers and organized labour are thus full-fledged members of the organization's decision-making bodies, such as the International Labour Conference and the ILO Governing Body, and participate equally in regional and sectoral meetings. In addition, the Constitution of ILO provides for consultative relationships with "recognized non-governmental international organizations, including international organizations of employers, workers, agriculturists and cooperatives". This provision has been put into effect with the establishment of three different categories of NGOs, the first of which applies to international NGOs with an important interest in a wide range of activities of the Organization that are granted general consultative or regional status. Standing arrangements have been made for the participation of those enjoying general consultative status in all ILO meetings, and in regional meetings for those with regional consultative status. Those NGOs which demonstrate an evident interest in at least one area of the work of the ILO and adhere to established procedures may be admitted to the second category, namely, ILO's Special List of NGOs. Finally, the ILO Governing Body extends an invitation to international NGOs which meet certain established criteria to attend the different ILO meetings for which they have demonstrated a particular interest.

30. Worthy of mention is the unique example of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the first programme of the United Nations system to include NGO representatives on its governing body as full participants, rather than observers. The Programme

Coordinating Board is comprised of representatives of 22 Member States (including both donor and recipient countries), the programme's six co-sponsors (UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank), NGOs and people with HIV/AIDS.

31. Thus, over the last decade, arrangements for consultation with NGOs have been revised, improved and extended across the United Nations system, allowing NGOs to shape in significant ways the international development and political debates. The advantages of this increased NGO participation cannot be overestimated. NGOs have introduced additional knowledge and information into the decision-making process; they have raised new issues and concerns which were subsequently addressed by the United Nations; they have provided expert advice in areas where they were the main actors; and they have contributed greatly to a broad consensus-building process in many areas which ensured commitment by all actors to a global agenda. This participation has proven to be a very useful addition to the regular intergovernmental work of the Organization. It should also be noted that, throughout the years, and despite their numbers, very few incidents of a disruptive nature involving NGOs have occurred.

III. A growing operational partnership

32. Practical cooperation in operational matters between the United Nations and NGOs has also undergone vast qualitative and quantitative changes in recent years. For a long time, and with the notable exception of relief work, there was little functional interaction between the United Nations system and NGOs in the field. However, as the comparative strengths of NGOs and the potential for their complementarity with the United Nations grew more evident, they have become indispensable partners, not only in development and relief operations, but also in public information and advocacy. Often, these close partners do not hold any formal status of association or consultation with the United Nations, in fact, formal relations are rarely a prerequisite for cooperation. Nevertheless, as their role as implementing partners, clients, advocates or funding sources for United Nations programmes increases, the need arises to provide flexible but clear guidelines to those United Nations officials dealing with NGOs.

33. The comparative advantages of NGOs in operational matters, as clearly summarized by UNIDO in a 1997 working paper entitled "UNIDO's approach to Non-Governmental Organizations", "lie in the proximity to their members or clients, their flexibility and the high degree of people's involvement and participation in their activities, which leads to strong commitments, appropriateness of solutions and high acceptance of decisions implemented". Most agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations system would agree to the following list, drawn up by UNIDO, of the assets provided by NGOs:

- Local accountability;
- Independent assessment of issues and problems;
- Expertise and advice;
- Important constituencies;
- Provision and dissemination of information;
- Awareness-raising.

34. There also exist a number of constraints or potential difficulties which limit the scope of United Nations collaboration with NGOs. They lie principally in the sheer number of organizations and their diversity, their occasional organizational weaknesses, the fragility of certain grass-roots organizations and the sometimes divergent positions among NGOs and between NGOs and Governments. Furthermore, over-dependence on external financing can sometimes undermine the sustainability and even independence of NGOs. Nonetheless, the balance remains overwhelmingly favourable to a strengthened cooperation between the United Nations system and NGOs in operational matters, at Headquarters and in the field.

35. Within the Secretariat, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has established strong mechanisms of cooperation with NGOs. In the six years since the General Assembly called for a coordinated system of humanitarian response to crises (resolution 46/182 of 19 December 1991), much progress has been made in mobilizing the collective efforts of the international community, including NGOs, to deliver assistance in a coherent and timely manner. NGOs are often the first to alert the international community to impending humanitarian crises, and are inevitably in the forefront of any response.

36. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee, chaired by the Emergency Relief Coordinator, is the central humanitarian policy-making body in the United Nations system. It is unique in that its composition comprises not only the heads of United Nations agencies engaged in humanitarian action (such as the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the World Food Programme or the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), but also the heads of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and three NGO consortiums, namely, InterAction

(a coalition of over 150 private non-profit agencies involved in development and relief assistance worldwide), the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (a consortium of some 100 private relief and development organizations based in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin America and North America) and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (an alliance of major NGOs involved in relief operations). The NGO consortiums thus fully participate in formulating system-wide responses to specific emergencies and in determining priorities and aims in support of the work carried out in the field.

37. Other mechanisms for consultation and exchange of information on humanitarian matters between the United Nations and NGOs at Headquarters include monthly meetings between the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and InterAction, which are co-chaired. At the field level, NGOs provide expertise and advice for United Nations activities related both to natural and man-made disasters. There are NGO liaison officers assigned to all of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs's coordination structures in the field. Since NGOs are frequently the implementing partners for many United Nations operational humanitarian agencies, they are increasingly involved in the consolidated appeal process, through their participation in assessment missions and in formulating programmes in their specific areas of competence and their activities and projects are often reflected in the United Nations consolidated appeal documents presented to potential donors. Their involvement in the process benefits populations in need by promoting closer coordination and encouraging better use of finite resources and providing potential donors with a more complete picture of requirements and actors in emergency situations. It is also worth mentioning that the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response has developed a code of conduct for NGOs active in this field. Thus far, 144 NGOs have adhered to the code.

38. All United Nations offices directly involved in humanitarian and relief operations, but also those working in the field of development, have established very strong operational relations with NGOs. UNHCR has a direct operational partnership with some 400 to 500 NGOs and, in 1997, funded 443 NGOs in 131 countries, in order to implement 931 projects at a cost of US$ 272 million. A Plan of Action for "Partnership in Action" was adopted by UNHCR and some 500 NGOs from all continents at a major conference held in Oslo in 1994. A tangible step in that process is the agreement by UNHCR and NGOs on the concept of and the need for an operational partnership agreement. This agreement, to be signed between UNHCR and NGOs, is intended to assist all concerned in setting out a basic common understanding on standards of conduct, field coordination, the technical and assistance standard at which both partners aim, and the guidelines which will be used in planning and implementation of refugee operations. In addition, both the Emergency and Technical Sections of UNHCR have a number of formal stand-by arrangements with NGOs for the provision of staff in the early days of an emergency.

39. The World Food Programme (WFP) has an operational collaboration with about 1,200 NGOs worldwide that covers a broad range of activities, which include data collection, exchange of information, identification and formulation of projects, needs assessment, nutritional survey, secondary transportation from storage point to final distribution site, distribution of food, reporting, monitoring or impact assessment. In emergency situations, the main areas of cooperation relate to food distribution and monitoring. In recent years, WFP has negotiated a "Memorandum of Understanding on collaborative working arrangements" with its major partners at the Headquarters level. These agreements aim at establishing a clear division of tasks and responsibilities between WFP and its NGO partners, thus building on the comparative advantages of both organizations and maximizing the effectiveness of the operations. The memorandum of understanding also makes reference to qualitative and socio-economic considerations, such as involvement of women in the planning and management of food aid operations, sustainability and environment issues. Memorandums of understanding on stand-by arrangements have also been concluded with a number of NGOs with a view to increasing WFP's preparedness capacity.

40. As stated above (para. 17), UNICEF has collaborated with NGOs ever since it was founded. Over the years, NGOs and community-based organizations have become a central element in the implementation of programmes and projects at the country level. Traditional areas of NGO involvement include child health, nutrition and development, basic education and water and environmental sanitation. In addition, since the adoption by the General Assembly of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989, annex), UNICEF has worked with NGOs in the area of child protection, child labour, children in armed conflicts and disabled children, early childhood care and development and youth health and development.

41. Cooperation between IFAD and NGOs effectively began in 1980 with the Fund's support to the Small Farmer Agricultural Credit Project in Bangladesh. An initial IFAD loan, along with a subsequent one in 1984, helped an NGO

– the now well-known Grameen Bank – to expand its operations of credit delivery to the rural poor. Since then, IFAD, in recognition of the vital role of NGOs in micro-development, has established a special IFAD/NGO Fund and an Extended Cooperation Programme, with an individual grant ceiling of US$ 75,000, for direct grant financing to NGOs. The aim of the Programme is to lay the groundwork for future IFAD investments, or to back up ongoing projects. To date, 107 grants have been extended and 228 NGOs have been involved since 1977 in the implementation of IFAD projects. The activities in which NGOs are involved include implementation of rural credit programmes, water resources development, crop production, small-scale enterprises and marketing support and institution-building. One third of cooperating NGOs are involved in credit delivery, tied with savings mobilization.

42. In 1997, UNDP formalized guidelines for the execution of projects by NGOs. Such arrangements must be approved by the Government concerned and must meet UNDP requirements for execution and legal status. Global, regional, interregional and country projects may be executed by NGOs. The procedures determine the role of NGOs as executing agents, project appraisal and approval criteria, implementation standards, and financial management, accounting and reporting. Last November, the Administrator urged all resident representatives to organize consultations and policy dialogue with civil society organizations and to secure their involvement in the formulation, design and evaluation of UNDP programmes and projects. He also called on them to increase NGO execution in line with the new procedures mentioned above.

43. The World Bank also recognizes that achievement of its overarching goal of reducing poverty in its client countries requires the active and substantive involvement of a broad range of actors, NGOs prominent among them. NGO involvement in the portfolio of projects approved each fiscal year has risen from an average of 12 per cent in the 1980s, to nearly 50 per cent in the past several years. In 1997, 47 per cent of projects approved anticipated some degree of involvement by NGOs. While historically, NGO involvement has been most prevalent during project implementation, there is also a growing trend to increase upstream involvement of NGOs in project preparation.

44. The main goal of UNFPA's operational collaboration with NGOs is to supplement and strengthen the national capacity to implement programmes in the sectoral areas within the Fund's mandate. UNFPA has been steadily increasing the amount of programme resources allocated to NGO-executed projects, both in absolute terms and in the percentage of total programme expenditures. By 1997, NGO-executed project expenditures had increased to almost 15 per cent of total UNFPA programme expenditures. In general, at the country and regional levels, funding assistance for NGO-executed projects was primarily for reproductive health activities. At the interregional level, such assistance was primarily for population and development activities, although support was also provided for NGO-executed reproductive health and advocacy projects.

45. Likewise, many NGOs are involved in the operational activities of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme, the majority of them in the field of drugs demand reduction. A number of NGOs have also executed major projects aimed at supply reduction (alternative development projects to reduce the economic dependence of peasant farming communities on illicit narcotic crops). Furthermore, UNDCP has established a special fund to provide grants to grass-roots organizations in developing countries and countries in transition. NGOs acting as executing agencies must have proper accounting procedures and be able to make accounts available for audit. They must be recognized by both their national Government and the host Government. All organizations, whether acting as executing agencies or in receipt of grants, must have the necessary managerial and technical capacity to undertake projects, with a demonstrated track record. NGOs acting as project executing agencies sign an executing agency agreement and a project document, and are subject to the same reporting procedure as any other executing agency.

46. Thus, NGOs are actively involved in United Nations operational activities, either as executing agencies of United Nations-led projects or as beneficiaries (or "clients") of projects or grants. Over the last few years, this involvement has increased and moved "upstream" as NGOs participate more and more commonly in the design of projects. Many United Nations agencies, programmes and funds have established or updated frameworks, guidelines or procedures, which sometimes include the signing with NGO partners of memorandums of understanding or contracts, to provide coherence and direction to their operational dealings with NGOs, and to balance the need for accountability to Governments and donors with the required programmatic flexibility at the country level.

47. NGOs are not only recipients of United Nations assistance. They have also become important sources of funding for some United Nations programmes and funds. UNICEF National Committees thus contribute roughly one third of UNICEF's overall income. Service-club organizations such as Rotary International (so far Rotary International has contributed US$ 240 million towards the

Polio Eradication Campaign, of which US$ 105 million went to UNICEF) and Kiwanis International (which has pledged over US$ 25 million towards the Elimination of Iodine-deficiency Disorders) contribute considerably to the successful outcome of such broad-based programmatic efforts. Other examples include a number of projects led by UNDCP which have also benefited from funds raised by NGOs ranging from the Norwegian Church Aid to the Drug Abuse Prevention Centre of Tokyo.

IV. Building bridges between civil society and the United Nations

48. The range of operational collaboration with NGOs actually goes much beyond fund-raising and programme delivery, to cover activities such as research and information outreach, policy dialogue and advocacy. Through the latter, NGOs have played a very significant and helpful role by establishing bridges between the United Nations and civil society at large. They have effectively disseminated information related to United Nations goals and programmes, publicized and gathered support for major campaigns carried out by the Organization, while at the same time transmitting the concerns and the views of various sectors of civil society to United Nations forums.

49. Over the years, the association of NGOs with the Department of Public Information has proved to be a very useful tool and a central feature of NGOs relations with the United Nations system. The main criteria for association with the Department is that NGOs have a demonstrated interest in United Nations issues and a proven ability to reach large or specialized audiences, including the general public, educators, media representatives, policy makers, and the business community. These NGOs must have the commitment and means to conduct effective information programmes focusing on issues of concern to the United Nations through their own publications, Web sites, radio and television programmes, or during their conferences, seminars, or round tables.

50. The NGO Section of the Department of Public Information serves the NGOs associated with the Department in a number of ways . It organizes an annual three-day conference, held at United Nations Headquarters in September. The conference, attended most recently by some 1,800 NGO representatives, has become a major event, which provides a significant platform for the dissemination of information to active NGOs and for genuine in-depth dialogue between them, United Nations officials and representatives of Member States. The Section has successfully encouraged United Nations information centres to organize parallel NGO conferences at the national and regional levels, so that NGOs unable to attend the Headquarters conference can network and exchange information with other national NGOs working on United Nations-related issues. Over the years, the network of United Nations information centres and services has developed close working relationships with national and regional NGOs, thereby increasing the Department's information outreach to many hundreds of organizations.

51. The Section also organizes weekly briefings for NGO representatives at United Nations Headquarters, highlighting a different issue of priority concern to the Organization each week. An average of 200 NGO representatives participate in this direct exchange of information on United Nations activities between United Nations experts, representatives of Member States and representatives of NGOs. The Section produces a weekly "DPI/NGO Link" with selected news and information on recent material available at the Department of Public Information/NGO Resource Centre. The Resource Centre, located at Headquarters and serviced by the NGO Section, provides current information materials from the Secretariat and many agencies, funds and programmes.

52. Another crucial link to the non-governmental community has been established in the last three years by the Department of Public Information through the creation of the United Nations Web site. Although the Web site is not specifically geared to NGOs, their knowledge of modern information technologies and frequent use of the Internet make them primary beneficiaries of United Nations efforts in this field. The United Nations Web site has witnessed phenomenal growth in the years since its creation, both in terms of the number of accesses and the scope of information material it contains. The number of accesses to the site reached 42.7 million in 1997 and continues to increase rapidly, averaging 141 access every minute in the first quarter of 1998. These accesses are from individuals or organizations located in 132 countries. The Web site (with related gopher sites) contains a wealth of information on United Nations activities and official documentation, which is now available in all countries to computer users with access to the Internet. The NGO Section maintains a United Nations/NGO link page on the site. The Department of Public Information is now engaged in a major redesign of the United Nations home page through which it hopes to target more specific audiences, and which should further facilitate NGOs' access to United Nations-related information. Twelve United Nations information centres have developed their own Web sites.

53. A very important mechanism for the dissemination of information and the fostering of a greater understanding and dialogue between the United Nations and NGOs was created in 1975, when several United Nations agencies established a joint project known as the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service. The Service reports annually to the Joint United Nations Information Committee, its governing body, and through the Committee, to the Administrative Committee on Coordination. The Service works with Secretariat departments, United Nations agencies, programmes and funds, Convention secretariats and other bodies and organizations of the United Nations system working in areas of economic and social development, sustainable development, humanitarian emergencies and human rights. It brings important United Nations policies, issues and activities in these fields to the attention of NGOs through publications and meetings. Its publishes, in particular, a bi-monthly newsletter, "Go-Between", which provides news and information on the United Nations system and on United Nations cooperation with NGOs. The Service also produces Roundup Reports on major United Nations events and conferences, as well as manuals, handbooks and directories designed to provide the NGO community with United Nations contacts and entry points, as well as information and guidance on the rules, procedures and scope for collaboration with the United Nations system. Most of the Service's publications are distributed to the 6,000 NGOs featured on its databases, and are uploaded onto electronic mail networks. Furthermore, as a trusted interlocutor between the United Nations system and NGOs, and to facilitate direct communication, interaction and dialogue, the Service organizes, or helps to organize, from time to time, consultations between United Nations agencies and NGOs on specific sectoral issues. It also organized two inter-agency consultations in 1997 to discuss cooperation with civil society, one entitled "Working with Civil Society: Issues and Challenges" and the other focusing on operational collaboration with NGOs .

54. Many substantive departments of the Secretariat, as well as agencies and funds of the United Nations system publish regular newsletters on their activities. NGOs, who are normally the primary recipients of these publications, disseminate the information received to their constituencies through their own publications or during their meetings. The Division for the Advancement of Women of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, for instance, maintains a large mailing list of NGOs accredited to the Fourth World Conference on Women (2,500 organizations) and other NGOs and individuals, totalling about 10,000 for some of its regular publications.

55. Some departments have also been specifically mandated to cooperate with NGOs to strengthen information efforts on important topics. For instance, NGOs are actively involved in the United Nations Disarmament Information Programme, which was launched at the first meeting of the second special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament in 1982. NGOs receive, develop and disseminate information and education materials produced by the Department for Disarmament Affairs. The Department also works closely with NGOs on special events, such as the celebration of Disarmament week, starting on 24 October every year. The Division for Social Policy and Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs convenes a biennial World Youth Forum attended by hundreds of non-governmental youth organizations, through which the Forums have built important bridges between the United Nations system and youth groups worldwide.

56. Owing to the unique capacity of NGOs to gather public support for and raise general awareness on a number of important subjects, joint advocacy campaigns with NGOs, at the international and national levels, have often met with considerable success. The Ottawa process, which led to the adoption, in December 1997, of the Convention banning anti-personnel landmines was a landmark in this regard, and is a striking example of effective partnership between intergovernmental, governmental and non-governmental actors. The process and the role played in it by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, an umbrella group of NGOs active in this field, have shown that determined, knowledgeable and well-organized NGOs that are willing to form caucuses and alliances can achieve successes in advocacy and lend tremendous weight to International and United Nations-led campaigns. Other examples include UNICEF's strong reliance on NGOs in its advocacy campaigns, such as those on the implementation of the recommendations of the United Nations report on the impact of armed conflicts on children, the "Child-friendly city initiative" or the subject of the sexual exploitation of children. NGOs' involvement in the latter was particularly important. The Conference on Sexual Exploitation of Children, held in Stockholm in 1996, was co-sponsored and organized on an equal footing by the Government of Sweden, UNICEF and the NGO called End Child Prostitution and Trafficking.

57. Although NGOs neither hosted nor organized the global conferences of this decade, their involvement in the process of collective analysis of the economic and social fields by the United Nations through these conferences reached unprecedented levels and led to an important breakthrough in the perception by United Nations officials

and Member States alike of the role of NGOs. The latter are no longer seen only as disseminators of information, but as shapers of policy and indispensable bridges between the general public and the intergovernmental processes. Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio in 1992, United Nations world conferences have aimed to encourage the increased participation of international and national NGOs from developed and developing countries, grassroots and community-based organizations and regional and international networks. Indeed, the degree to which a world conference mobilizes the attention of NGOs and other organizations of civil society has become an important criterion for judging its success. The massive presence of NGOs in the conferences increased public awareness of the conferences and the issues they dealt with and, ultimately, of the United Nations, and was a driving force for the setting of international norms and standards. NGOs participating in the conferences also provided :

- Technical input and expertise on the issues under consideration;
- A linkage between the national and international deliberations on the issues, thereby enlarging the transparency of the process and the accountability of actors involved;
- An interested and informed constituency, at both the international and national level, for the implementation and monitoring of the results of the conferences;

NGOs have also worked with national Governments towards the implementation of the agreements reached and decisions taken at the conferences.

58. NGOs benefited in different ways from their participation in the conferences. They were encouraged, in particular, to organize themselves into regional or thematic caucuses, which enabled them to manage better their participation in the international policy dialogue and mobilize themselves into effective forces for advocacy work by facilitating the development of shared perspectives and approaches. By forming alliances, networks and caucuses, NGOs also demonstrated that their fast-growing numbers do not necessarily lead to increased logistical or political difficulties for the organizers of United Nations conferences. In addition, the global conferences led to innovative forms of NGO participation, some formal and some informal. On a significant number of occasions, NGOs participated in intergovernmental working groups, informal sessions and even "informal informal" discussions. In some of these, and always at the discretion of the Chairman, NGO representatives were permitted to comment. Finally, the positive experience of the involvement by NGOs in the global conferences also gave impetus to the Economic and Social Council to review and update its arrangements for consultation with NGOs (as described in section II above), in the course of which the Council established arrangements for their participation in future conferences, which had hitherto been determined on a case-by-case basis for each conference.

59. NGO attendance and involvement in all major conferences from United Nations Conference on Environment and Development to Habitat II has demonstrated the existence of a worldwide constituency for United Nations activities and has allowed the Organization to build new bridges with civil society at large.

V. Participation of non-governmental organizations from all regions

60. The collaboration between NGOs and United Nations agencies and programmes, in particular in operational matters, involves a great number of organizations based in developing countries. These NGOs participate in the activities of the United Nations, either as beneficiaries of projects or as full partners. As the United Nations continues to decentralize its activities, and as efforts by programmes, funds and agencies are increasingly defined at the country level, the participation of local and national NGOs is likely to expand further in the years to come.

61. UNDP encourages participation of NGOs from programme countries on a widespread basis through project execution and other cooperative mechanisms. Examples also abound of participation by local NGOs in the implementation of UNICEF's country programmes. IFAD has also cooperated mainly with southern partners in implementing projects. Of the 319 NGOs with which it has worked, 255 (or 80 per cent) were from developing countries. Of the 1,200 NGOs collaborating with WFP worldwide, 200 are "international" organizations based in industrialized countries, which are important partners in emergency food aid operations. The others are all national southern organizations, more frequently involved in protracted refugee operations or development projects.

62. Similarly, the policy of UNHCR is to work with national NGOs whenever possible. While the primary objective of its strategy in support of national organizations is to ensure appropriate local capacity to meet the humanitarian assistance needs of refugee operations in the most effective manner, a secondary aim is to build the

capacity of national organizations to work beyond the needs of a UNHCR operation and to contribute, in the longer term, to rehabilitation and development. UNHCR supports national NGOs through the identification and assessment of their capacities followed by training and capacity-building programmes. UNHCR also encourages international NGOs to work directly with national NGOs, with a view to handing over activities when feasible. Similarly, in order to promote local NGO participation and ensure long-term benefits of food aid assistance, WFP requests international NGOs to involve local partners in their activities. In some cases, this request has been included in the contract determining the modalities of collaboration with the international NGO.

63. Efforts to promote the role and participation of NGOs from developing countries in United Nations activities must first concentrate on facilitating the emergence of such organizations and on building their capacity to work effectively with the United Nations. The policy environment for NGOs and civil society varies enormously from country to country, which is a powerful determinant in influencing both the contribution and growth of the NGO sector. In particular, there is a great variation in the legal framework relating to NGOs in each country. In response to this situation, the World Bank, through its NGO Unit, has developed a programme to give best practice advice on NGO law. The Unit has been working with the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law since 1995 to analyse existing NGO laws in 100 countries. The result has been the publication, in draft form, of a "Handbook on Good Practices for Laws Relating to NGOs". Together with the Centre and other experts, the Bank is working in many countries to assist Governments and other parties to analyse the weaknesses of existing laws in this field and to draft more appropriate ones.

64. Other United Nations programmes engaged in capacity-building for national NGOs include the United Nations Drug Control Programme, which provides technical assistance to strengthen technical, legal, training and managerial capacities of NGOs involved in reducing the illegal production, cultivation, manufacture, sale, demand, trafficking and distribution of narcotic drugs. In fact, the Programme endeavours to include capacity development in all its activities in order to ensure their sustainability. Capacity-building of civil society organizations is, therefore, almost inherent to its technical cooperation activities.

65. Southern NGOs are particularly important partners of FAO, because of their knowledge of local situations and the services they provide to needy farmers and rural communities. FAO has learned that a key form of cooperation with NGOs in developing countries is through capacity-building programmes, designed specifically to strengthen the effectiveness of southern NGOs in areas of work which fall within its technical mandate. Such actions, however, are limited, as FAO does not have any sizeable resources earmarked specifically for NGOs. Its normative or operational activities in favour of NGOs have to be funded mainly through extrabudgetary resources.

66. Lack of financial means and inadequate access to relevant information have also prevented southern NGOs from contributing as much as other NGOs, based in the north, to the policy dialogue conducted in United Nations forums. It is striking, in this regard, that of the 1,550 NGOs associated with the Department of Public Information, only 251 are based in developing countries. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) also notes that only 25 per cent of organizations formally associated with it are southern NGOs, and that they rarely participate in the Trade and Development Board and Commission meetings because of financial constraints.

67. By allowing national, regional and subregional NGOs to apply for consultative status, Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31, adopted at the conclusion of the review by the Council of existing arrangements for consultation, should ensure a greater contribution by organizations from developing countries to the policy-making process in the economic and social fields. National NGOs now account for the majority of applications for consultative status. The need will soon arise, as an increasing number of organizations from developing countries seek consultative status with the Council and other United Nations bodies, for specific arrangements and mechanisms to assist them in making proper use of this status. This assistance will be manifold and, to be most effective, should be provided at the national level through United Nations field offices.

68. Efforts are already being undertaken by United Nations programmes, a number of Member States as well as large international NGOs to provide financial and other assistance to organizations based in developing countries and to facilitate their participation in United Nations policy discussions. With modest levels of financial support from donor Governments, the United Nations Non-governmental Liaison Service, for instance, has established an effective and credible system for identifying and financing participation by representatives of developing country NGOs in United Nations conferences and forums such as meetings of the Commissions of the Economic and Social Council. Thus, since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, the Service has raised funds to finance and facilitate the participation in United Nations

meetings or conferences of over 700 NGO representatives, almost entirely from developing nations.

69. As a result of such and other efforts, the global conferences of the 1990s were marked by a sharply improved regional balance among NGOs, as compared with previous large conferences held by the United Nations. These global conferences and the parallel civil society forums have also allowed national and regional non-governmental organizations from the south to establish useful links and networks with counterparts in the north.

70. Often, NGOs themselves provide resources to ensure a more balanced geographical representation among their representatives. Examples include the financing by NGO committees on Disarmament in Geneva or New York of travel and accommodation expenses for selected organizations to participate in their sessions or special events. The Department of Public Information/NGO Executive Committee, for its part, has in the last few years appealed to all NGOs associated with the Department of Public Information for funds to assist representatives of NGOs in developing countries to attend and speak at the Annual Department of Public Information/NGO Conference. The United Nations also encourages NGOs to form regional specialized committees away from Headquarters to allow easier participation by local organizations in substantive discussions. The United Nations Drug Control Programme, for instance, which has long worked with the Vienna NGO Committee on Narcotic Drugs and the New York NGO Committee on Narcotics and Substance Abuse, recently assisted Asian NGOs to form a similar Committee in Bangkok. Finally, Member States sometimes provide funds to finance participation by NGOs from developing countries in meetings organized by the United Nations, as is the case for UNCTAD's annual NGO/Trade Union consultations.

VI. Enhancing the participation of non-governmental organizations in all areas of the United Nations system

71. In his report on "Renewing the United Nations: a Programme for Reform" (A/51/950), the Secretary-General stressed how the increasing role and influence of civil society, and of NGOs in particular, is contributing to a process of enlargement of international cooperation and spurring the United Nations system and other intergovernmental structures towards greater transparency and accountability and closer linkages between national and international levels of decision-making and implementation. This is a positive process which the Secretary-General welcomes and encourages. At the same time, a number of questions have arisen with regard to the participation of NGOs in United Nations activities, linked both to the financial and legal constraints within which the Organization operates and to the fast-growing number and diversity of NGOs engaged in collaboration with the United Nations.

72. The NGO sector constitutes a very diverse institutional category with significant variations with respect to size, resources, impact, methodology, objectives and approach to international organizations. In order for the United Nations to interact better with NGOs and to continue to cooperate with them in a mutually beneficial relationship, it needs to learn more about this complex and expanding universe. The great majority of departments, funds, programmes and agencies which have established consultative and/or operational relations with NGOs have set up computerized databases allowing them to organize the information they hold in terms of contact points for these organizations, activities and/or fields of interest. While efforts have been made in recent years to integrate some of the databases within the same department or agency, the creation of a single database encompassing all NGOs working with the United Nations system would neither be feasible nor necessarily useful. However, efforts must be made to harmonize existing databases so as to facilitate the exchange and compilation of information on NGOs across the system. As a first step, and if necessary resources can be identified, the Secretary-General will entrust the United Nations Non-governmental Liaison Service with carrying out a survey of all NGO databases that currently exist in the United Nations system.

73. The United Nations must attempt not only to draw a composite picture of the NGO community but also to provide its staff with the tools to deal with their fast-growing number. NGO sections or liaison offices are frequently understaffed and sometimes ill-equipped to service large groups of NGOs. The Secretary-General will encourage all departments, programmes and funds of the system to ensure that these sections are appropriately staffed and are, to the extent possible, allocated the necessary logistical and financial resources. In this regard, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs has reallocated additional staff and resources to its NGO Unit in 1998 to allow it to cope with its tremendous caseload. The staff assigned to work with NGOs must be the primary recipients of any training programmes specifically dedicated to cooperation with civil society.

74. Within the Secretariat, procedures and policies governing relations with NGOs are set out in the

Secretary-General's bulletin ST/SGB/209 of 21 December 1984. The Secretary-General will instruct the Department of Management, in collaboration with the Office of Legal Affairs, to study and update the Bulletin to ensure that it reflects not only the present practices in this field but also the new arrangements set out in Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31. A new Bulletin will also serve to improve consistency in the Secretariat's relations with NGOs and increase awareness among Secretariat officials of the mandates given to them in this field by the governing bodies of the Organization.

75. In the broader context of the United Nations system, relations with NGOs vary widely in nature and scope from programme to programme, as described in previous sections. While these relations are governed by the specific goals and regulations of each organization of the system, it is imperative that all officials concerned share their experiences and best practices so as to promote coherence and efficiency in our dealings with civil society while ensuring a proper implementation of existing mandates and rules in this field. The Inter-Departmental Working Group on NGOs mentioned above (para. 14) is a useful tool in this regard, and the Secretary-General will encourage all relevant departments that have not yet done so to designate representatives to attend its regular meetings, in New York and Geneva. All programmes, funds and specialized agencies are also invited to send representatives to the meetings, as many already do. The Secretary-General also welcomes initiatives such as the one taken last year by the Consultative Committee on Programme on Operational Questions in collaboration with the United Nations Non-governmental Liaison Service to organize an inter-agency consultation on operational collaboration with NGOs. Participants in the consultation, held in Geneva in November 1997, established a number of groups tasked with the elaboration of general principles to underpin operational collaboration with NGOs, updating guidelines to Resident Coordinators in this field and undertaking a system-wide survey of experiences and best practices in NGO capacity-building.

76. If NGOs are to continue making a meaningful contribution to the work of the United Nations, it is crucial that their access to information and documentation be secured in a timely and appropriate manner. United Nations efforts in this regard are described in section IV of the present report. The Secretary-General will pursue and expand these efforts, in particular those related to the United Nations Web sites. In order that NGOs, in particular those based in developing countries, benefit from information exchanges and discussions on matters of interest to them, the Secretary-General will also encourage departments that have the technical ability to do so to conduct electronic conferences on the Internet through the World Wide Web as was done recently by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research and the Secretariat of the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction.

77. Due to the financial and legal constraints of the Organization, however, NGO demands for prompt and comprehensive information cannot always be adequately satisfied. Member States may wish to consider a number of measures which could remedy, at least partially, this situation. For instance, allowing representatives of organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council to occupy, on an as available basis, a number of seats in an appropriately designated area of the General Assembly Hall during public debates on items in the social or economic fields, could facilitate their access to the Assembly's official documentation without any additional financial expense on the part of the Secretariat. Currently, NGO representatives can only sit in the public balcony from which they cannot access document distribution counters and where acoustic and technical problems sometimes impede them from following important debates on matters of direct relevance to their work with the United Nations.

78. Another topic frequently brought up by representatives of NGOs interested and involved in United Nations activities is that of the access to the Organization's Optical Disk System (ODS). ODS was originally developed as a storage and archival system for the use of the United Nations Secretariat and the Permanent Missions of its Member States. Later, in 1996, access to ODS via the Internet was developed. Any expansion of the system to accommodate additional users requires funds to improve the technical infrastructure, as otherwise it would impede access by the current users. Member States have specifically requested the Secretariat to ensure that their access be maintained without limitations. Expansion of ODS to allow access by NGOs can thus only be done by instituting a charge-back fee which is used to enhance the infrastructure. Smaller NGOs, in particular those based in developing countries, may not be able to afford this fee and to benefit from this service. While a great number of documents are now posted on the United Nations Web site, ODS offers a much wider access to United Nations documents in all official languages, including complete United Nations parliamentary documentation since 1993, resolutions and decisions of the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council and the Trusteeship Council since 1946, certain official records of those four bodies since 1946 and administrative issuances of the Secretariat. Member States may, therefore, wish to

review funding for ODS, in order to allow for wider dissemination of its products.

79. Member States may also wish to consider the establishment of a trust fund for the purpose of facilitating the participation of NGOs from developing and least developed countries, and countries in transition, in activities of the Organization. This fund could serve to provide such NGOs with the means of retrieving important information from United Nations sources as well as attending important meetings or conferences of relevance to their work.

80. In the aftermath of the global conferences and with the emergence of a new international environment characterized by unrestricted flows of information, the United Nations has entered a new era in its relations with NGOs and other civil society actors. The Economic and Social Council recognized this changed relationship when it adopted resolution 1996/31. Many agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations system have followed suit. The Secretariat, for its part, has tried to adapt to this new situation in creative and innovative ways and will pursue its efforts in this field. The United Nations is committed to seek the participation and contribution of NGOs in its work. New approaches, attitudes, methods and responses are required throughout the United Nations system if we are to meet this challenge effectively.

Notes

[1] In section III of Agenda 21, the following nine "major groups" were identified: women, children and youth, indigenous people, NGOs, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, scientific and technological communities, and farmers.